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Viewing cable 08SOFIA305, BULGARIA NEEDS U.S. SUPPORT TO BREAK AIR FORCE

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
08SOFIA305	2008-05-14 11:08	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL//NOFORN	Embassy Sofia

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.bivol.bg/wlarmy.html>

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SOFIA 000305

NOFORN
SIPDIS

FROM AMBASSADOR BEYRLE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/11/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL MARR BU

SUBJECT: BULGARIA NEEDS U.S. SUPPORT TO BREAK AIR FORCE
DEPENDENCE ON RUSSIA

Classified By: Ambassador John Beyrle for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C/NF) Summary. Rapidly losing capability, the Bulgarian Air Force is in dire need of modernization, but meaningful transformation is made impossible by Bulgaria's overwhelming dependence on Russian airframes. The use of aging Russian aircraft not only limits Bulgarian capabilities, but maintains a crippling dependence upon Russia for parts and maintenance. Russia has routinely withheld these in order to exert pressure and extract favorable decisions. Bulgaria is keenly aware of this dependency and is reaching out to allies for suggestions on affordable, NATO-interoperable airframes.

¶2. (C/NF) Four outcomes are possible: 1) Bulgaria has no Air Force, 2) it has a weak and Russian-dependent force, 3) it cobbles together a fleet of limited capacity with European fighters such as Swedish Grypens, 4) it adopts a U.S. fighter and becomes a capable, interoperable ally in air operations. A U.S. multi-role fighter is the only option that will enable Bulgaria to have an effective Air Force over the longer-term. Transitioning Bulgaria to a U.S. airframe would drastically improve Bulgaria's capabilities and draw our two armed forces into even closer cooperation. Most critically it would eliminate Russian influence over an entire section of the Bulgarian military and reduce its leverage over the Ministry of Defense as a whole. Post has requested DOD provide a concrete proposal to the Bulgarians for acquisition of a U.S. aircraft, with the goal of formally presenting this to the Bulgarians during high-level meetings this summer. End Summary.

CURRENT CAPABILITIES

¶3. (C/NF) Saddled with pre-1989 equipment and doctrine, the Bulgarian Air Force is poorly led, poorly funded and increasingly unable to perform effectively as a NATO ally. Their transport fleet is small. It was recently bolstered with the addition of one C-27J, but the rest consists of a handful of old non-NATO compatible Soviet AN-12s. With the exception of 12 non-combat capable Eurocopter AS 532 Cougars, the helicopter fleet is also in poor shape with only six MI-17s (equivalent to the Russian MI-8 HIP), six Bell 206B-3,s and two operational MI-24 HINDS. Worst off is Bulgaria's tactical fighter fleet. Bulgaria maintains a handful of MiG-21s which will retire by mid-2009. They have 12 fully mission capable Su-25s but have budgeted very limited funds to fly them this year (less than 10 hours per airframe. The Bulgarians rely entirely on 12 aging MiG-29s to do all NATO Air Policing. As a result, they were forced to sign a ten million dollar contract with Russia for depot-level maintenance work required to keep them flying.

THE PROBLEM: DEPENDENCE ON RUSSIA AND MiGS

¶4. (C/NF) The MiG airframe is the major obstacle to the transformation of the Bulgarian Air Force. It limits Bulgaria's capabilities, but more significantly it fosters an unhealthy dependence on Russia. Because it is still using Cold War aircraft, Bulgaria lacks western operational instructions, relying instead on outdated Soviet tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) and logistics. Virtually nothing in the Bulgarian Air Force has moved forward since 1989. Because of the MiG airframe, the Bulgarian tactical Air Force is forced to maintain a robust relationship with Russia simply to keep their tactical fleet in the air. This allows Russia tremendous influence over Bulgarian Air Force policies, operations and procurement decisions. So long as Russian aircraft remain the backbone of the Bulgarian Air Force it cannot fully transform, modernize or integrate into NATO.

THE SOLUTION: U.S. AIRFRAME

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¶15. (C/NF) Transitioning away from Russian aircraft would have a far-reaching impact on Bulgarian military modernization. The specific capabilities of a new airframe would be secondary to NATO interoperability and the development of a strong relationship with the United States Air Force. Bulgaria has begun this process in its other services. The purchase of a used Belgian Frigate was a catalyst for transformation of the Bulgarian Navy. Through Belgian partnership, Bulgarian ships and crews, once entirely wedded to Russian equipment and doctrine, are now NATO certified and currently participate in major NATO exercises in the Mediterranean. The Bulgarian Army has benefited from the provision of U.S. equipment and vehicles and has transformed itself considerably through its ongoing participation in operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Bulgarian Air Force, however, remains stuck in 1989.

¶16. (C/NF) Bulgaria knows it can not continue down this path. It is committed to maintaining a tactical Air Force and is actively searching for an affordable multi-role fighter. It is in our interest to ensure that Bulgaria chooses a U.S. solution. Moving the Bulgarians to a U.S. fighter would reduce Russian influence over Bulgarian defense policy, integrate Bulgaria further into NATO and ensure a long-term strategic relationship with the United States. A switch to a European fighter such as the Eurofighter or Swedish Grypen would be an improvement, but still clearly a second-best solution since none of the Europeans have a history of providing the technical, logistical and tactical support Bulgaria desperately needs. It is not a coincidence that Bulgaria's NATO neighbors Greece, Turkey and Romania have all opted for U.S. airframes. Additionally, switching to a European fighter only addresses short-term needs and does not offer an eventual bridge the Joint Strike Fighter, the only long-term outcome that would enable Bulgaria to fly and fight effectively and interoperably with the United States.

¶17. (C/NF) Bulgaria has approached the United States formally in multiple forums requesting information on available U.S. aircraft. Many top Bulgarian officials are anxious to transition to a U.S. fighter as soon as possible, but Russian ties run deep and staying with a Russian fighter has traction in other circles. European countries have expressed interest in selling aircraft to Bulgaria and have a strong lobby. Bulgaria is a special case due to its limited funds, Russian dependence and critical need for technical and logistical support. Presenting the Bulgarians with the standard approach we roll out for other wealthier allies will not work, but a comprehensive, affordable, sustainable U.S. offer with full U.S. government support will almost certainly succeed. Time is short because the Bulgarians are reaching the decision point: to stay with the Russian MiGs into an unforeseeable future, or transition to a new aircraft.

¶18. (C/NF) Previous US Navy and USAF efforts have laid a good foundation. Now more vigorous DoD contact is needed. In addition to a concrete offer to present to Bulgarians, a senior DoD visit for this specific topic in the next few months would be highly valuable. Finally, we understand that release of the Joint Strike Fighter to Bulgaria has not been approved. We need to revisit that decision. This Embassy was not consulted in the original decision, and we still do not have clarity on the criteria or decision-making process that led to that determination.

¶19. (C/NF) Final Comment: Bulgaria has proved itself a steadfast ally and reliable partner in international security, currently ranking as the fourth largest EU troop contributor in Iraq. Within many Bulgarian institutions, however, and particularly among the military, there is a

split between younger transatlantic thinkers and older "default-Russia" forces. It is crucial that we make efforts now to empower those forces inclined to look toward NATO and the United States. The Bulgarian Air Force is at a crossroads. Decisions made in the upcoming months will

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determine whether Bulgaria ends up with no Air Force, a very limited capability force, or a fully effective and interoperable force with a deep connection to the United States. A U.S. commitment to identify an appropriate multi-role fighter will lead to a broad institutional shift inside the Bulgarian Armed Forces and pay very large dividends in the future. Inaction is an invitation to Russia, already a dominant force in the Bulgarian energy sector, to continue to exercise control over significant sections of Bulgarian defense. It is likely this issue will be raised when the Bulgarian Prime Minister travels to Washington and meets President Bush next month. High-level engagement from Washington prior to this meeting will be crucial to developing a mutually beneficial proposal and ensuring a positive final outcome. End Comment.

Beyrle